



# WESTWAYS

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**T**HE SEA WAS unnaturally calm. Only the gentle slap of wavelets and a low, moaning breeze reminded us we were at anchor. The sun had disappeared with supper, but the night sky was lighted with the small stars city dwellers never see.

A dull booming resonated off the cliffs of the nearby island, soon increasing in volume and tempo. Faint cries drifted to us, and a flickering orange glow suffused the beach.

We tumbled into the skiff and rowed toward shore, the oars stirring up magical sparks from tiny bioluminescent organisms swarming the dark water. We leaped out as the bow scraped the sand, then dragged the skiff beyond the reach of the sea.

Ten Indians were gathered in a circle around a fire, singing a native chant to the cadence of a huge drum. Their faces glistened from the fire's warmth. We remained at a distance until they finished, then advanced as they welcomed us.

The people were in high spirits, perhaps slightly awed to be standing on an island occupied centuries ago by their forefathers. We felt honored when they invited us to join their circle, for this was a privilege that had never been granted to our generation.

"Smoke?" offered our leader.

An Indian took the proffered cigarette, then returned it with a grin.

"Me no wantum menthol!"

With this simple jest, we became friends.

These handmade objects filled certain needs: practical, decorative, ceremonial. Coastal tribes, notably the Chumash, invented tools for foraging in intertidal regions. But beyond the breakers lay an untapped wealth of organisms, so the Indians lashed bundles of tule together to make a simple boat.

The tule boat was inefficient, however; it was slow and leaked constantly. The Chumash began making dugouts from logs, but the dugouts proved to be fair weather craft. They had little freeboard to keep out choppy seas.

With wonderful inventiveness, the Indians built up the sides of a dug-out board with hand-carved planks to form a canoe. The planks were stitched in place with twine made from





## Return of the Sea Hawk

Text and photographs by Peter C. Howorth

more than the Indians in their journals. One Spaniard claimed: "The cayucos seem to fly through the water." (Cayucos is the Spanish word for kayaks, used to describe the craft of Indians much farther north. Canoas is the Spanish word for canoes.)

The gradual encroachment of Hispanic culture ended the Chumash one. Indians merged with Californios and found new directions—not always to their liking.

A few Indians remembered the old way of life. Fernando Librado was a remarkable example—he lived to be 111 years old, finally passing on in 1915. If it were not for Fernando and a few others, there would be a dearth in our present-day ethnographic knowledge of the Chumash.

Fernando met John Peabody Harrington, an anthropologist, linguist, and ultimately the chief chronicler of the Chumash. For years Harrington gathered information, compiling reams of notes on many aspects of Chumash culture. Fernando was one of his key informants. The aged Indian clearly remembered events dating to the early 1800s. He recalled essential construction details of the *tomol*.

In 1974, Dr. Travis Hudson, curator of anthropology at the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History, began delving into Harrington's material. He found a bonanza of information per-

taining to the *tomol*. With a team of researchers, he translated several thousand pages of *tomol* notes.

By the fall of 1975, the translated notes had been organized into an annotated book manuscript. At this time, Dr. Hudson wanted me to build a *tomol* model for the museum. I suggested building a full-scale replica instead—and taking it on a sea voyage.

With this in mind, I spent some weeks reviewing the translated Harrington material. I compiled a list of measurements such as "cubits," "fingerbreadths" and "halfway up a man's thigh." This I checked and rechecked until I had an accurate value for each figure. Next, I converted the measurements into inches and feet and drew up a plan of the vessel.

Community volunteers gathered driftwood from Santa Barbara County for the *tomol*. The logs were cleaned, then milled into planks at a lumberyard. With the helpful advice of Harry Davis, a local boatbuilder, my wife and I built the replica.

Named *Helek*, or "sea hawk" in Chumash, she was twenty-six and one-half feet long, three and one-half feet wide and about four and one-half feet high at the bow and stern. Her planks were sewn together with over 700 stitches. True to the old way, we used no metal fastenings to build her.

From the start, considerable interest

red milkweed. The seams were caulked with tule cores and sealed with a concoction made from hard tar and pine pitch. Hard tar was mined from certain areas, pulverized, then melted over a fire with pine pitch. This special mixture, called, *yop*, served as a caulking compound.

The *tomol*—Chumash planked canoe—was used to carry freight and passengers from the mainland to the islands of Southern California. Each *tomol* was similar, although lengths ranged from twelve to thirty feet.

The *tomol* was the most advanced technological achievement of North American Indians. It was lightweight and fragile, but very swift. Early Spanish seafarers marvelled over the beautiful craft, often describing the *tomol*



was displayed by the Quabajai Chumash Indian Association of Santa Barbara, made up mostly of people of Chumash descent. Several members helped during the construction phase. When the *Helek* was completed, the Quabajai took her to sea, trying her out under different conditions.

While her trials were under way, Dr. Hudson plotted a course for the *Helek* to follow during the proposed sea voyage. The trip was to begin at San Miguel Island, some forty miles southwest of Santa Barbara. From there, the *Helek* would cruise from island to island, crossing to the mainland at Ventura, then up the coast to Santa Barbara. The voyage would take nine days and cover over 100 miles. Each stopping point was to be at the site of an ancient Chumash canoe port.

Ernest H. Brooks II, president of Brooks Institute of Photography, volunteered his fifty-seven-foot converted trawler, *Just Love*, as a support and escort vessel. On June 26, 1976, we sailed from Santa Barbara, anchoring for the night at Cuyler Harbor, San Miguel Island.

Early the next morning, following an evening of singing and drumming, the Indians launched the *Helek* through the surf. It had been more than a century since the last Chumash canoe voyage.

Again the sea was flat, unusual for this part of the channel. Northwest gales often churn the water around San Miguel Island into a mariner's nightmare. But today, as if welcoming her native sons, the sea was placid.

In the distance, the sun climbed over one mountain range after the next, gently spreading its soft warmth and light over the water. A breeze arose from the land mass, then died as it harmonized with the sea.

The *Helek* was beautiful. She cleanly sliced through each chop, allowing the water to merge at her stern with scarcely a ripple to reveal her passage. And she was fast. She indeed "seemed to fly through the water."

Fernando had called this "flying *aguja*." *Aguja* was the word for bar-

racuda, a fish which the Indians caught by trolling with their canoes.

The Indians paddling the *Helek* were glowing with excitement. They were at home again in a craft identical to their ancestors' *tomols*. It didn't matter what they did on the mainland; here, they were recapturing their heritage, reviving what once was lost.

Kote Lotah, their spiritual leader, began a chant. The others joined in and the *Helek* raced through the glassy sea in rhythm to the song. Soon a pod of California sea lions merged with the convoy, playfully porpoising along beside the canoe.

Behind Kote was Slo'w, the Quabajai chief; then Suluwanasait, from the Pacango Indian Reservation at the San Diego/Riverside County line. Akhewo sat in the stern, steering the craft with his ten-foot oaken paddle.

San Miguel Island soon was left astern as the *Helek* raced along. The *Just Love* maintained a watchful station during the crossing. In the galley, Chi-chi-oh, the burly Indian cook, fried up a tremendous breakfast of eggs, potatoes, onions and several other ingredients.

The relief crew—Thot Hokanay-oh, Sespi, Kuic, Tomoloc and Thot—devoured the breakfast hungrily. When they finished, we leaped into the skiff to relieve the paddlers.

The skiff was a fourteen-foot work boat I had made years before. She was hell-for-stout and weighed half a ton. For this reason she was affectionately dubbed "the lead sled." Nevertheless, she served us well during the voyage. It was easy to shuttle crews from *Just Love* to the *Helek* with the lead sled; moreover, she was always on hand for emergencies. Rick Terry, a Brooks student, helped me each time a change of crews was required.

The *Helek* made good time. Soon our convoy was slipping along the inside of Santa Rosa Island. Later, however, a head wind sprang up from the northeast. In a few moments the *Helek*'s progress slowed to practically nothing. I made two suggestions to the crew: close with land to gain some protection from the wind; place some

flotation in the canoe in case she broached in the choppy seas. Ballasted as she was, the *Helek* would sink instantly if she swamped. Accordingly, Rick and I ran some inner tubes over to the canoe in the lead sled. With these secured, the crew and the canoe would stay afloat if she broached.

The wind, as if satisfied with our preparations, abruptly died out. Another menace soon appeared, however, in the form of several large sharks. One cruised deliberately over to the canoe, glided underneath, then disappeared. No one was sorry to see it go.

Finally the *Helek* rounded Carrington Point—the northeast corner of Santa Rosa Island—and glided into the calm waters of Bechers Bay. The Indians had paddled across twenty-two miles the first day of the voyage.

Although special permission to land had been granted by the island's owners, they seemed surprised to see us. Perhaps the long-forgotten sight of a Chumash canoe landing on the island was too much for them.

"They didn't know what was happening," exclaimed one of the paddlers. "Suddenly a native canoe landed on their beach and a bunch of wild savages jumped out!" The laughing "savages" gave Dr. Hudson an impromptu dunking in the sea to celebrate their first crossing.

The crew voted to sleep on the beach again that night, so the *Helek* was dragged beyond the water's edge and we ferried their gear ashore.

That evening we feasted on barbecued spare ribs, garlic toast, beans and salad. Slo'w, the chief, ate two dozen spare ribs with the effortless ease of long practice.

Once, he claimed, a restaurant had offered him a three-pound steak free if he could eat it all. Slo'w complained when they brought him the steak, for they had failed to bring the rest of the meal. The offer was withdrawn.

Slo'w also lived up to his reputation as a loud sleeper that night. The next morning the paddlers were scattered up and down the beach for a mile in either direction of their chief. Nothing could silence his loud snoring.



Even so, the Indians were up early. They were well into the channel between Santa Rosa and Santa Cruz islands before sunrise. The sun seemed to take forever to come up, but when it did, the Indians and the canoe were silhouetted in the golden glare. In the distance, the top of Santa Cruz Island seemed to float, miragelike, above a thin veil of morning fog.

The crew had become a team. Before the voyage, they had practiced only a few times—some had never paddled or even known how to swim. Now their paddles dipped in unison, in perfect rhythm to the native chants. The ten short trial voyages had paid off, for the eleventh had proved to everyone what the Quabajai could do.

The previous evening we all agreed that if the journey ended at Santa Rosa Island, we would still be satisfied, for the Indians had already completed the longest, most treacherous stretch of the voyage. But today we were already halfway across the next channel. Everyone was exuberant.

Later, as we neared Santa Cruz Island, a distant tanker materialized, swiftly passed a mile or so ahead, then headed out to the open sea beyond. It was routine for the tanker; but what a contrast between her huge, swift, steel-hulled form and the trim, tiny *Helek*. We began to appreciate the ancient Chumash—seafarers without peers on this continent.

As we closed with land, the inevitable breeze sprang up, this time to our advantage, for it was behind us. The *Helek* flew, making seven or eight knots in the teeth of the wind. When the crew shipped their paddles and rested, the *Helek* sailed by herself at a respectable three or four knots. She was a testimony to the ingenuity of primitive people, who, left to the simplest resources, developed an efficient craft which could carry them across the trackless sea.

Soon we passed lonely Gull Rock, off the southwest corner of Santa Cruz, and entered the glassy calm seas beyond. Midway down the outside of the island, a contrary current developed, making progress difficult.

The Indians kept paddling under the hot sun, refusing to abandon their goal. By midafternoon we reached our destination: Coches Prietos, the ancient site of the main canoe port of the Channel Islands.

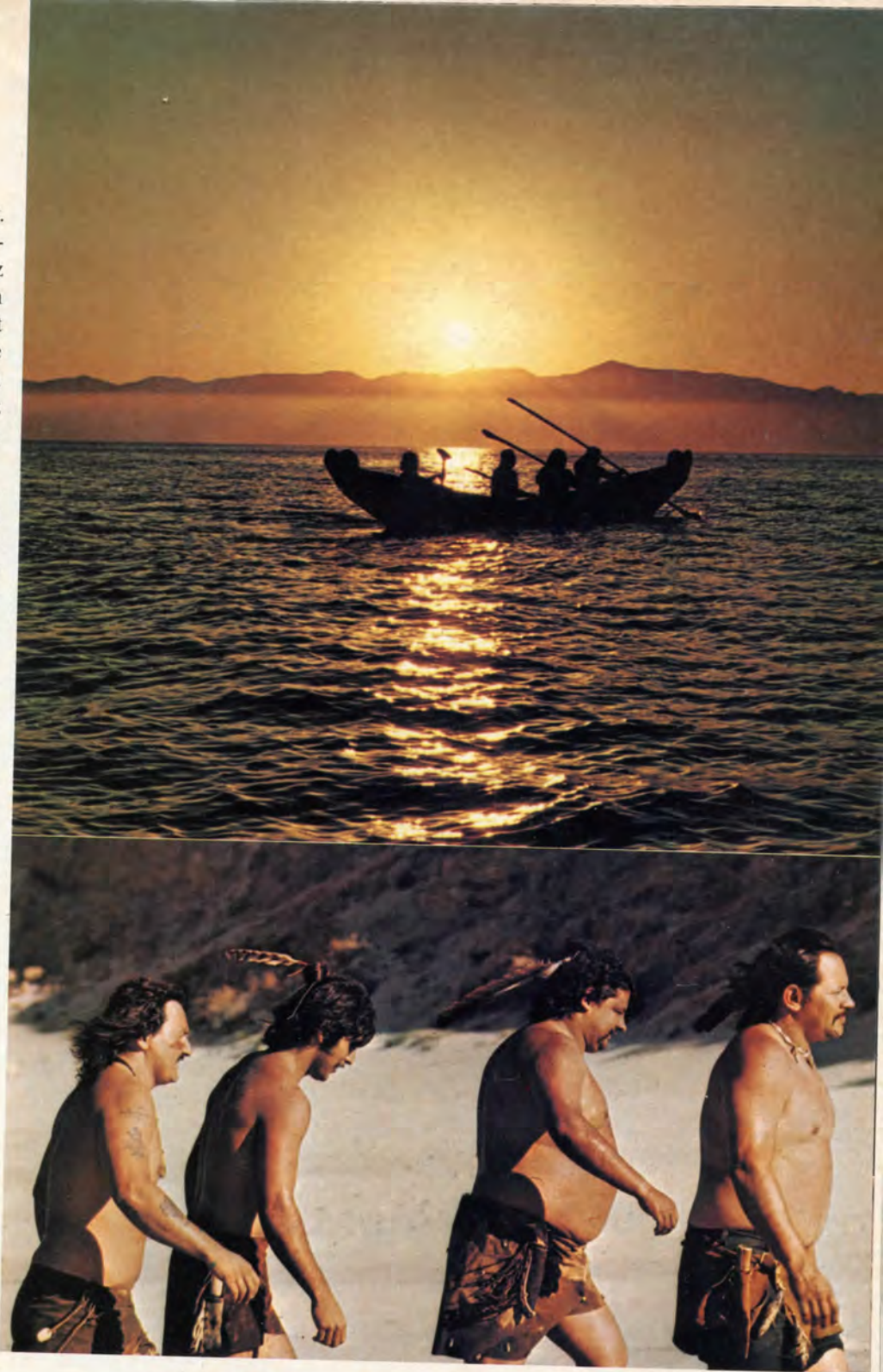
The crew, pressed beyond exhaustion, struggled through the surf in the *Helek*. She broached in the breakers, spilling the Indians, paddles and ballast onto the sand. With a tremendous effort, the men dragged the swamped

canoe ashore; then they collapsed on the beach.

The entire crew was suffering from sunburn, saltwater sores, dehydration and extreme fatigue. Chi-chi-oh, the good-natured cook, lay unmoving, his skin burned crimson from the merciless sun. He was on the verge of heat exhaustion. A few more minutes at sea would have been disastrous.

The *Helek* had suffered also. The

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fourth plank of her port side was badly cracked. A jagged split extended three feet to either side of the center brace. Depression settled on our small company; gone were the high spirits of previous days.

Eventually, a sturdy jeep came bouncing down the canyon, its progress heralded by great dust clouds. Surprisingly, a young woman hopped out to greet us. She introduced herself as Marla Daly, an assistant at the Santa Cruz Island Field Station. The station, operated by the University of California, Santa Barbara, was open for the Indians; Dr. Hudson had obtained advance permission to stay.

While Marla Daly rattled off in her jeep to fetch a larger truck, Diane Brooks toiled in the *Just Love's* galley. She cooked several cauldrons of spaghetti for the tired crew, but their appetites were nil. Even Slo'w ate little.

Later the trucks arrived to transport the crew and their gear to the field station. The wind arose that evening, rushing through the canyon in warm, stiff gusts. Rick and I went ashore to secure the *Helek* for the night, then the *Just Love* was moved to a safer anchorage.

The Indians spent the following day enjoying a well-deserved rest. Ernest Brooks, Dr. Hudson, Rick Terry and I went ashore in the afternoon to repair the *Helek*. We drilled holes on either side of the cracks for stitchings, caulked the splits, then sewed them up. In less than an hour the *Helek* was ready for sea.

The Indians were ready too. Thot Hokanay-oh, with a burst of his prevailing good humor, asked Dr. Hudson to stand in a certain spot. "OK, now spread your legs apart and put your hands on your hips," he demanded. Dr. Hudson, his slender form silhouetted by the sun, did as he was asked. "Doesn't he look like a big pair of scissors?" quipped Thot Hokanay-oh.

The next morning a powerful current swirled in from the east. Since paddling the canoe against it would be a losing battle, we lifted the *Helek* aboard the *Just Love* and motored to the east end of the island. The wind arose again that afternoon, buffeting

us with gusts up to forty-five knots. Our spell of fine weather had ended.

Later we poked our bow around the end of the island. The swells, close together, marched across the surface, their crests blown white by the gale. It was definitely no place for the *Helek*.

The ancients certainly would never have ventured forth with the sea in such a state; the Quabajai were no fools either. They had already proved what they meant to. With no lessening of pride, they elected to transport the *Helek* to the mainland coast the next morning. From there the voyage could be resumed.

The following afternoon, near Ventura, the *Helek* was launched from the *Just Love*. A rollicking swell vindicated the crew's decision—farther offshore the sea was obviously worse.

On shore, a welcome had been prepared. The Quabajai, many in native costumes, greeted the paddlers. Indians from Ventura and Oxnard were also on hand. Their fire danced high toward dusk, and soon the dull booming of the drum punctuated the revelers' songs. It was a night of celebration.

The morning of July Fourth dawned gray and hazy. The Indians launched the *Helek* from shore with the practiced discipline of a well-organized team. Soon she flew, and in practically no time, the *Helek* reached the entrance to Santa Barbara Harbor.

Our convoy, starting at San Miguel Island, had travelled over 100 miles across the sea. The Indians had paddled more than half this distance in a fragile craft made from twisted driftwood. A fingerbreadth of planking had kept out the hungry waves and carried the Quabajai back in time to the ancient realm of the Chumash.

The people had become Indians again, and they were proud of it. Social barriers had dissolved at sea, and the venture proved the merit of the joint effort. The Indians had enriched their cultural heritage, museum researchers had gained valuable data on the ancient *tomol*, and the people of Brooks Institute had provided the support, as well as the vehicle, to make it possible. Even more important, each organization had stretched itself into the community, helping one another toward a brighter future.

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pinwheel on the front. Their long-awaited triumph was unfortunately tempered by the knowledge that the crowd's overwhelming favorite was the fifteen-foot yellow "Yo-Yo" created by Ottoway; Larry Eifert, a local artist; and Joe Koches, a gallery owner. "People went wild over that yo-yo," remembered one observer. "The fellows were dressed in yellow outfits with red hats and they ran in and alongside the yo-yo and passed out small yo-yos to the kids. . . ." That year also included the first entry by females. "The Bicycle Built for Three" by Diane Rosburg and Charlotte and Andrea Ottoway, a canopied rig with three bicycles that moved forward by going in circles.

The wacky traditions of "The Race" as it's now called by most Ferndalers were carried on in 1975 with entries of stagecoaches, fuzzmobiles, steamers, one-, two-, three-, four- and five-wheeled entries and one rig that walked down the course on half-moon-shaped forms. As one longtime resident of Ferndale commented, "I thought I'd seen everything until those crazy guys came up with something crazier." He may have been referring to "Gut Throb" created by Larry Eifert and Dick Crane. The two artists attired in pink tights and hot pink capes climbed on either side of a revolving tubular steel structure and swung around and around—sometimes twenty-five feet in the air. The rotations moved "Gut Throb" slowly forward to win the 1976 grand prize.

What Ferndale has in store for this year's race is impossible to predict. The artists, when asked about the race, usually started mumbling something about "top secret." However, one former participant hesitatingly revealed that he was planning to construct a giant camera with a darkroom on the back. He plans to be inside the camera, take Polaroid pictures of the crowd and pop out every few minutes in his top hat and old black suit to show the finished photographs. Sounds hard to top but as Bob Brown, creator of the polka-dot turtle, commented, "No one ever quite knows what the race is going to be like until it happens. Maybe this year it will be lighter than air."

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